MAJOR CHARLES PIERRE L'ENFANT

By Frank G. Beatty, '27

WASHINGTON, D. C., the Federal capital of the United States, was located by George Washington and planned and laid out by a famous French officer. All true Americans know of Washington and what he accomplished, but very few know of the Frenchman and his accomplishments. The French officer was very famous in his day, but now only his great masterpiece stands in remembrance of him and his ability, for the rest of the world has forgotten him. He was Major Charles Pierre L'Enfant, picked personally by Washington to execute the planning and building of a new and beautiful city, because of the success he had had in all of his previous undertakings.

Pierre L'Enfant inherited from his father a very artistic ability and nature, which, when added to his very thorough knowledge of architecture and engineering, made him the genius who was needed for the great work which he was destined to produce.

On August 2, 1754, Pierre L'Enfant was born in Paris. While he was a small child his father allowed him to go along when he went into the country to paint landscapes. His father was employed by the Royal Court of France to paint landscapes and battle scenes. During these trips with his father, Pierre must have acquired an appreciation of beautiful landscapes, which was useful to him in his planning of the Federal city.

When he grew older, Pierre was sent to the university where he studied architecture and engineering. At the age of twenty-three he was commissioned a lieutenant in the French army. In February, 1778, he sailed to America with the French troops to help the Americans in their revolt. At first his services were voluntary and at his own expense, but he was soon commissioned as a captain of engineers and was transferred to the Southern division where he was placed in the infantry under Lieutenant-Colonel Laurens. In one of the battles around Savannah he was badly wounded, consequently he was confined to bed while the American forces were building fortifications about the city. Later, when the British again approached Savannah, he was able to take the place of a wounded major, even though it was necessary for him to use a crutch to be able to walk. He took the major's command to his own misfortune, for he was taken prisoner with some other Americans during the battle. After a short time the Americans and British exchanged a few prisoners, and in the exchange L'Enfant was considered equal to a Hessian officer. In 1873 he was raised to a majority, because of the excellent services he had rendered the American cause and the zeal which he had in doing so. His knowledge of the art of fortification and merit as a disciplinarian made his services invaluable to the American army. Later, when the new country was started and a regular army established, L'Enfant was among the notable army officers who devised the first system of discipline and exercise that was adopted by Congress for the army.

During the long hard winter at Valley Forge L'Enfant spent his spare time sketching the portraits of his comrades. Being gifted as an artist he was able to get very striking likenesses in his sketches. He made some of George Washington and several of these are still to be found in the possession of the descendants of William Digges. These sketches are considered more natural than any other portraits ever made of Washington.

When the French minister, La Suzanne, wished to have a beautiful banquet hall erected and a very grand banquet arranged in honor of the birth of the Dauphin, L'Enfant was the man whom he engaged. Whenever a ceremony or a banquet was to be held by the wealthy people or fraternal organizations, it had become the habit to call upon L'Enfant to make all the arrangements necessary.

Upon Pierre's return to France after the Revolution the French government conferred upon him a Royal Brevet ,which gave him a substantial pension, in recognition of his services and wounds received while fighting for the colonies. During his short visit to France he was commissioned to act as the representative of the Order of the Cincinnatti, of which order he was a member, in ordering from the noted French jewelers the eagles which were to be worn as the insignia of the order upon the uniforms of the members. While in France, his native country, L'Enfant started a new chapter of the order there, making the king and his minister of war members. The forming of this international order pleased the king greatly, for he believed that it would result in strengthening the bonds between France and America.

In the following year L'Enfant returned to America to spend the rest of his life, for during his service in the war he had become attached to the young nation. Here he took up the professions of architecture and engineering, beginning his work in New York City. When the new United States government was just getting placed on its feet, the Frenchman was able to see far enough ahead to know that this country would be a great prize for any European nation which could overpower and hold it. With this thought in mind he worked out a plan for defense and advised Congress to raise an adequate army and navy and fortify the harbors. He said, "America cannot live free and develop in safety without the power and ability to resent." His plan for defense, if adopted, would have given him a position of supervising engineer. But luckily or unluckily, as the case may be, his plans were not adopted. It is known now that the plans which he submitted were excellent.

While he was in New York his greatest piece of work and, incidentally, the only one of which a record remains, was the remodeling of the Old City Hall. In making the plans his tendency to see his works *en grande* caused him to overrun the sum of money that had been put aside for the work, but when the people of New York heard this they at once gathered enough money together to complete the construction, with the belief that Congress, when choosing a site for the Capital of the United States, would choose New York City, because of the building made for Congress to sit in, as the Capital City of the United States.

In designing and erecting this structure L'Enfant wished to have a finished product that could nowhere be equalled in beauty. The finished building was American in characteristic parts but in general appearance and plan, the classical lines of Europe had been followed. Inside and out the building had been well decorated by many ideas which had originated in the mind of the Frenchman. The most noted of the exterior decorations was the huge stone eagle that was placed directly above the entrance. All of the people who came to see the new building marveled at the eagle

which guarded the entrance to the most beautiful building in America.

Contrary to all expectation, Congress soon returned to Philadelphia. Then the building resumed its former use and was again called the City Hall. Later in 1812 this building was torn down to make room for the larger and more useful buildings of New York. So this, the first characteristic American building, and its beautiful decorations, were passed on into history.

As soon as the states had all ratified the Constitution, another subject arose for discussion in Congress, namely, "Where should the Capital City of the nation be located?" Of course every city, town and village wished to have the honor, but finally a compromise between the North and South was brought about and Maryland agreed to give the government a piece of land ten miles square anywhere along the Potomac River. This offer was accepted and Washington was commissioned to choose the land. Many years before when Washington served under Braddock, they had camped on a hill overlooking the junction of the Potomac River and the Eastern Branch, and the broad stretch of land which gradually ascended from the banks of the river to the hill where they were encamped. This broad sweep of land Washington early decided would make an excellent location for the capital city of a nation. So when he was given the commission by Congress he at once picked out the spot which he had previously dreamed of.

On hearing that the city was to be built, L'Enfant wrote to his friend, Washington, saying that he would be honored in being chosen as the man to execute the preliminary work of planning the city. When L'Enfant visited the site of the city with Washington he was very enthusiastic about the choice which had been made, and as soon as he and Washington returned to Mt. Vernon they began to plan the city. Following the plan of Versailles, Pierre drew avenues radiating out from two central points, one the Capital, and the other the executive mansion, and to this plan he added Jefferson's plan of having streets running east and west, and north and south. He placed the Capital Building on Rome Hill, which was so named by an early settler who had a dream in which he saw a House of Parliament on the hill, surrounded by the governing city of a great nation.

On a hill a little higher and over a mile away he placed the executive mansion. The reason for this, as explained by Washington, was so that the President and his cabinet would not be disturbed by the Congressmen. L'Enfant's tendency of seeing things *en grande* was very useful here for instead of looking forward only a hundred years, he looked ahead a thousand years and planned a city that would be large enough for a country of fifty states and 500,000,000 people. For the first few years the city seemed to be a failure, but after a hundred years had passed the city began to show results such as L'Enfant had in mind when he planned it. The French officer put his heart and soul in the task of planning the city, and so when people desired to make changes in his plans he felt as though his whole plan would be ruined, but Washington, who was his most intimate friend, backed him up as much as possible. Once when Mr. Carroll, a wealthy landowner, had a house built in the center of what was to be a street, contrary to L'Enfant's many pleas, a wrecking crew was sent to raze the building. Much trouble arose over this incident, nearly placing L'Enfant in jail, but Washington, by a great deal of work, was able to quiet the trouble. When he finally did he advised L'Enfant to be more cautious. But when the same thing happened some time later, L'Enfant was notified by Jefferson that his services were no longer needed.

This dismissal was for L'Enfant an end of his greatest dreams. Immediately following this unfortunate incident, all of the landowners but two signed a testimonial lamenting his departure and praising the work which he had accomplished. This was a consolation and comfort to him, for they showed that they knew how much of his time and devotion had been put into the planning of the city.

Following this he was called to New Jersey to draw plans for the first manufacturing city of America. It was called Paterson, N. J. After a year's work there he was again dismissed upon the same basis as before.

From Paterson he was called to Fort Mifflin and employed as an engineer. While he was there, Robert Morris, the wealthiest man in America, hired him to design and build a magnificent mansion in Philadelphia. Here again L'Enfant had a chance to do his work *en grande*, and he proceeded to do so to Morris's distress, for at one time Morris was completely out of money, but he made it possible to let L'Enfant continue with the work. Then just before the mansion was completed a catastrophe happened, placing Morris in debtor's jail and leaving L'Enfant penniless, for he had placed all of his money in with Morris's.

For all of the time and work which L'Enfant had put into the planning and beginning of the Federal City he had never received compensation. He was so well pleased with being allowed to plan the city that he neither had his plan copyrighted nor asked for any compensation, and so when copies of his plan were sold he received no royalties as he had expected to. Now in his great distress and poverty no one seemed to remember him and his works, for his only influential friend, Washington, had died some time before. Therefore he sent a letter to Congress reminding them of what he had done and telling of his present condition, but they sent him nothing. By this time, through his neglect and the French Revolution, his family fortune was gone and the farmer who worked the land which L'Enfant had inherited from his father was pocketing the income. L'Enfant had also been neglecting the pension which the French government continued to pay him.

In 1812 he was appointed "Professor of Building Engineering" at West Point, but he haughtily refused the position. Finally Congress voted him some money, but as it was received by L'Enfant his creditors appeared to make their demands.

For the remaining years of his life he was often to be seen in the capital or walking over the newly marked streets of his city. He also spent much of his time visiting the friends he still had among the early settlers, finally becoming a permanent resident at the home of William Digges. It was here that he died in 1825, and was buried in the Digges family graveyard. After his death an inventory of his possessions showed that all he had was a few watches, surveying instruments and some books.

Thus ended the life of the genius to whom the United States owes the distinction of having one of the most beautiful cities of the world as the seat of government. At the time of his death no one realized the great work which he had accomplished, but in the twentieth century he received the recognition which was due to him.

In January, 1902, what L'Enfant had hoped for and worked for came to pass, for the Senate committee decided that the plan of the City of Washington as originally made by L'Enfant, having stood the test for over

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a hundred years and having met the approval of all, the plan would be carried out in the future. Following this by a few years came a ceremony and honor which L'Enfant had never expected.

On April 8, 1909, L'Enfant's remains were removed from the Digges family graveyard and taken to the rotunda of the capital where the casket, draped in the French and American colors, rested in state while a service was conducted, attended by the President and his cabinet, the French ambassador and military attaches. After this service the body was carried to Arlington under military escort and interred there with the nation's most honored dead. Two years later the granddaughter of William Digges unveiled the monument over his grave. The speeches of the day were made by President Taft and Elihu Root. The keynote of Root's speech was struck in the sentences: "Few men can afford to wait for a hundred years to be remembered. It is not a change in L'Enfant that brings us here, it is rather that we have changed and have just become able to appreciate his work."

From the monument, which is on the slope going down to the river in front of the Lee mansion, one can look across the historic Potomac and see the beautiful city which bears the name of the most revered man in American history.